

Winter 2021

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Recommended Citation

Helfers, Edward (2021) "If Elected Alamosa Rodeo Queen," *Yalobusha Review*. Vol. 32 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr/vol32/iss2/5>

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IF ELECTED ALAMOSA RODEO QUEEN

Edward Helfers

I would use the sequined sash, the fiberglass tiara, the silver belt buckle molded like a shooting star, the long lasso of golden hair hanging past my hip to enact a number of long overdue changes.

For starters, in lieu of mutton busting, sheep would ride the children, somehow.

Flash photography, irritant to animals and competitors alike, would result in a hefty fine.

Clowns would not be permitted in the ring or on the premises. In their place, during the first intermission, understudies from the Albuquerque Ballet (painted longhorn skulls, camouflage leotards) would reinterpret the minotaur's search for identity, his mother's disavowal, lonely years spent in solitude and starvation, death by the blade of Theseus, sweet deliverance from that endless, inescapable maze.

Barrel racing continues as before, except on bicycles through quicksand.

Calf roping shall be renamed calf rearing, the champion determined by depth of bond and milk chugging.

To the EMTs leaning listless over the fence, flanked by a fleet of ambulances, I would say go home, be with your loved ones, tend to the unseen wounds that have opened in your absence.

Second Intermission sans performers: Trampolines. Pogo sticks. A ring of fire. The audience is asked to imagine.

Say goodbye to rubbery hot dogs and rock hard funnel cake, soft drinks short on syrup, stale popcorn that sticks between your teeth for days. Instead, the new and improved concessions menu features peppers exclusively (hatch, poblano, sweet, bell, ghost). Master gardeners from all corners of the state will be on hand, ready to divulge gestation tips, to commiserate over the great difficulty of determining

final spring frost.

Announcers will be hired on the basis of beatboxing ability and knowledge of Indigenous history.

Disqualifications will be issued early and often, for violations including untucked shirts, unsportsmanlike conduct, failure to acknowledge fate, illegal use of adhesive, and mullets.

As for the bulls, I would learn their names, their favorite lullabies before risking my hand into trailer enclosures, opening to ruddy tongues my salted palms. One by one, unbeknownst to handlers distracted by my flirtatious rivals, I would quietly unlatch the gates, relinquishing the imprisoned unto parking-lot-adjacent pastures, ragged meadows overrun with buttercup and cornflower, grasses tall enough to hide tawny recumbent bodies. It is possible, I hope to prove through this experiment, for anger to become joy, rage to become release.

In the final intermission, two dozen fans selected at random wander the ring blindfolded in a rousing game of red light, green light. Faults result in hogties until one “survivor” remains, rewarded for their efforts in song, a slow, somber rendition of *Tumbling Tumbleweeds* played on recorder by me.

Dear dejected bulldoggers gathered in the bleachers, punching dust out of ten-gallon hats, rolling and unrolling the sleeves of your weathered checkered shirts, cracking knuckles in a mildly threatening manner, let me say this, “At least you have each other. Reflect on all that you are not, and find strength in the admission of weakness.”

Everyone leaves a winner. But the real winner, the one who waits longest to ask who the winner is, will be crowned Rodeo King, afforded a sparkling suit for the Cowboy Ball, halfway between late Elvis and Mariachi maestro, and when the band strikes up for the ceremonial dance—steel guitars twanging, sleepy brush on the snare—I will be gone, singing under starlight, driving down the mountain in a stolen convertible, headed to the hospital where the rookie hung up on the horn days prior lay badly in need of a miracle, of some stimulus to snap him from his stupor, and when that happens, when he gazes into my appraising eyes, perhaps I will finally see a man whose mind can be changed, who can learn how to let go of lonely deserted dreams.

EDWARD HELFERS teaches for the Literature Department at American University in Washington, D.C. You can find some of his work in *Puerto Del Sol*, *The Rupture*, *DIAGRAM*, *Web Conjunctions*, and elsewhere. Born in Missouri, he now lives with his wife and two sons in Silver Spring, Maryland.